

The Builder.

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 4, 1852.



HE half-yearly meetings of railway proprietors, which are now taking place in due course, have suggested to us two or three points for a gossip with our readers in connection with what is now the business of the whole kingdom—our railway system. Its importance has outgrown the wildest visions of early dreamers. It has altered the whole face of the country,—will alter the whole face of the world,—and, in connection with the electric telegraph, which is, perhaps, even more important still, is preparing for the world a wondrous future. In a pamphlet on the advantages of railways, published by the conductor of this journal some years ago, in student days, when men's minds were less made up as to the results of railways than they are now, the writer closed his remarks on the probable effects of the establishment of railways with this sentence—“The length of our lives, so far as regards the power of acquiring information and disseminating knowledge, will be doubled, and the whole world will ultimately become as one great family, speaking one language, governed in unity and harmony by like laws, and adoring one God.” The pamphlet was favourably received in all quarters, but many even of those who went fully with it demurred at the closing sentence, as hyperbole and exaggeration, and, as one intelligent commentator wrote, thought that “when the author had laid down his pen, having achieved a useful work, some malignant imp had taken it up and added the closing paragraph, to throw discredit on all that preceded it.” It will scarcely be read so now: such a result appears not merely possible, but probable. The railway and the electric telegraph are two of the greatest results before us of the philosophy taught by Bacon,—in opposition to the philosophy taught by Plato and the other ancients,—the philosophy which seeks to improve the condition of mankind; the science which deals with things instead of words; which produces what we need, lessens suffering, shortens life. As Lamartine observes, too,—“There is no one who knows or can say if there be more morality, more development of intelligence, in a thought of Plato than in the thought of Watt.”

Apart from its higher developments, a very few gross facts will show the position of the railway system in our country. It appears that up to the end of 1850 railway companies had raised a sum equal to 340½ millions sterling, and retained powers to raise a further sum of 122½ millions. In June, 1851, the number of persons employed on railways open for traffic was 63,500, and on those in course of construction 43,000.

In the United Kingdom, 85½ millions of persons travelled by railways in 1851, and paid eight millions sterling for doing so; while for the transport of goods, seven other millions were paid, according to the official report of Captain Simmons, recently published. Look,

too, at the Railway Clearing House, which may be described as representing all the railways in account with any individual line, and which has become a matter of enormous magnitude, with a business of the most elaborate character. About fifty companies are associated in this system, of which the public know nothing, though they owe to it facilities of the greatest value and importance.* The increasing amount and difficulty of the business transacted here, in settling the proportions to be paid and received by different lines in respect of the travellers and goods passing over more than one will ultimately lead to amalgamation in one shape or other, even if other circumstances did not tend the same way. The public will have to protect themselves when this approaches. The companies, if they are wise, will make the present despotism so light that it may not be felt. Should they pursue an opposite policy, we may prognosticate, without fear of failure, the ultimate assumption of all the lines by the State.

The history of the great lines, should it ever be written, will amuse and startle posterity. The recklessness with which money was spent, the coolness with which millions after millions was asked for beyond the sum originally put down for the cost, and the consequent sacrifice of the original shareholders, will be some of the items for wonderment.

At a meeting of the Great Northern Railway, a few days ago, the chairman, Mr. B. Denison, M.P. came forward with a request of this sort, and asked for a million to supply deficiencies in their previous estimates. He was “not ashamed of saying, and hoped he never should be ashamed of saying, that they had made a mistake.” The item land and compensation amounted to 299,000*l.* more than they expected; for plant and machinery the excess was 525,000*l.*; and so on. But Mr. B. Denison is a rare hand at “making things comfortable,” and the shareholders received his explanation, and were perfectly satisfied. “In future,” said he, with praise-worthy candour, “I shall be most cautious in expressing any opinion on the estimates given by one man or another. I have never built a house on the estimate of an architect; I think I never shall; and I never have had very great faith in the estimate of engineers or architects, or people of that description. I remember, several years ago, the engineer who projected the Hull docks being complained of because they had cost twice as much money, or three times as much money, as it was said they would cost, and his answer was this, ‘If I had told you what I thought they would cost, you would never have begun them;’ and I strongly suspect that architects and engineers belong to that class of people.”

The cost of station at King's-cross, illustrated by us some time ago, is put down at 123,000*l.* It is fast approaching completion.

As a Board, men will do what they would shrink from as individuals. A more striking example of this could not be found than the case of the West London Railway. The North-Western Railway took a lease of this line, which connects their own, the Great Western, and the Thames, and agreed to pay for it, after discharging various liabilities, a certain proportion of the returns. They solemnly covenanted to “efficiently work and repair the

railway and works hereby demised, and indemnify the West London Railway Company against all liabilities, loss, charges, and expenses, claims, and demands, whether incurred or sustained in consequence of any want of repair, or in consequence of not working, or in any manner connected with the working of the same railway and works.”

They even agreed that in the event of constructing or leasing any other railway or works which might come in lien of the West London the shareholders of the latter should have the same share in the rates, &c. of the new works as if they formed part of their own line. And yet, in the face of this, the North-Western shut up the West London line, excepting for a few heavy goods; and, stranger still, have been able to find law enough, up to this time, to allow them to perpetuate with impunity this, which is nothing short of a fraud. There is not one of the honourable men composing the Board of the North-Western who individually would be guilty of conduct which, as a body, they have exhibited to this unfortunate company.

The meeting of the Chester and Holyhead line, held last week, shows that this company are still smarting under the enormous expenditure into which they were led. Had they been contented with one tube at Bangor instead of two, they would have something less to grieve over. Still, in this case, as in many others, the result tends to the ultimate advantage of the country. The railways have developed constructive science to a remarkable extent, and led to wonderful works. We might adduce as a striking instance of this, if it were needed, that Messrs. Fox and Henderson are now forming an iron roof for a station at Birmingham, the span of which is two hundred and twelve feet, and which will extend 1,000 feet! The same firm, as we understand, have entered upon the construction of railways in Egypt, which can scarcely fail to benefit England and produce extraordinary results.

For the prevention of accidents on lines improved arrangements are still needed. It ought not to be the case, but it undeniably is, that the risk of danger in travelling has considerably increased since 1849. Statistics prove it.

We have had various suggestions as to self-acting signals of late, but we have first, it appears, to deal with the principle, to which the railway authorities indiscriminately and entirely object. The following quotation from a communication by a Mr. Wilkins, who had invented a self-acting time-signal about four years since, after a rather severe collision on the London and North-Western Railway, will sufficiently prove that such is the fact:—

“I obtained an interview with the manager of the London and North-Western Railway Company, and in less than a minute was dismissed without an examination of my scheme, and with an assurance from him that a self-acting signal would never do for railways because they were self-acting.”

Now had our correspondent proposed to substitute self-acting signalling machinery for signal-men actually employed, we think that the manager would have been perfectly right in objecting to the principle; but are signal-men to ride on a railway that self-acting signals could only be used as a substitute for the more expensive article? It may be that railway authorities can view the question in no other light; that

* An Appeal to the Public on the Subject of Railways. By George Godwin. How strangely the title sounds even already!

* An account of the Clearing House will be found in *Lardner's "Railway Economy."*